



<Commentaries> Considerations in Response to the Session on Demography and Immigration

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journal or publication title	Inter Faculty
volume	7
page range	209-213
year	2016-09-10
URL	http://doi.org/10.15068/00147475

Considerations in Response to the Session on Demography and Immigration

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Abstract

Some brief considerations in response to the session on Demography and Immigration

Keywords: migration, transnational, linguistic capital, disaster, living at risk

1. Overview of the Session

The session on Demography and Immigration was the first session of the second day of the International Conference “Fragmentation and Divergence: Towards the Management of Social Transformation”. The session started with a keynote presentation from Le Bras (EHESS): *Migrations internationales: de l'économie à l'affinité*. It included two interventions from invited discussants: John Eade (University of Roehampton, London) and Eric Mace (University of Bordeaux, France), who developed certain themes stemming from the lecture. The session then continued with an open discussion, which I moderated in my capacity as chair.

When thinking about what made the session intellectually stimulating and thought provoking but also very lively and human, it seems important to acknowledge that international migration has affected the personal and professional paths of most of those who were in the audience. This shared experience brought a certain quality of listening and an engagement, which was not only professional but also very personal.

Those who come from a social science perspective are critical of the strong influence of economic and policy-oriented approaches towards migration since it plays down or ignores other important dimensions such as the migrants' experiences, lives and identities. During the session on Demography and

Immigration it was refreshing to see the discussion cover a range of perspectives towards international migration, mainly due to the interdisciplinary character of the panel and the audience.

In the text below I will reflect on some of the themes, which were highlighted by Le Bras and developed in the discussants' presentations. These themes were also echoed in the general discussion, which followed the formal presentations.

2. Personal and Professional Considerations

Inevitably, my reflections are informed by my professional background and interests and these are bound up with my personal and professional migration path. I grew up in a family which brought together three ethnic traditions (Russian, Jewish and Bulgarian), I moved between Bulgaria and Russia and seven years ago I migrated to London. I was trained in Linguistics (Semantics), but gradually developed wider interests in cross-cultural communication, international education and migration. Moving to London I trained in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and I have been working since 2009 as a practicing clinician in a variety of settings, i.e. the British National Health Service and private practice in the UK and Switzerland. I have worked predominantly with migrants - from asylum seekers and refugees to transnational CEOs - although this has not been a conscious specialization.

My experience as well as the experience of many of the participants in the discussion is an illustration of what is called 'transnationalism' where people operate across national boundaries and seek to maintain close ties with their country of origin and the 'host country'. Transnationalism also helps to highlight the social and cultural elements underlying migration, the fluctuating processes of linking 'here' and 'there' and the feeling of co-presence, the related emergence of hybridity and in-betweenness and the creation of diasporic communities.

3. Brain drain - Brain gain - Brain circulation

These transnational ties are important in the context of the widespread discussion about brain drain/brain gain and brain circulation. This discussion also emerged during the session, which is not surprising given the composition of the

conference's delegates. Clearly, scientific diasporas are catalysts for brain gain and brain exchange through forms of knowledge and technology transfer, as well as financial and social remittances (Séguin et al. 2006: 78-90).

Again the discussion of brain drain/gain/circulation has been dominated by a focus on economic factors and by a tension between optimistic and pessimistic interpretations concerning the link between migration and development (e.g. de Haas 2010: 228). However, we are also dealing with people's feelings about moving between countries and this involves not just migrants but also others in both the country of origin and destination. The emotional reactions of those left behind in the country appear quite diverse. Some resent or are saddened by the departure of fellow nationals and may have ambivalent feelings about those who have come back. Those returning also have complex feelings about the country they have spent some time in and their 'homeland'. They may miss the country they went to and find an uncertain, ambivalent welcome in their 'homeland'. 'Home' may look different and the skills and knowledge they have gained through migration may not be appreciated.

Research has shown that a significant proportion of migrants go back to the country they migrated to or move on to another country. The development of a transitional labour market across the European Union, assisted by cheap transport and rapid information flows, encourages these forms of 'circular migration'.

Le Bras' presentation of statistical data showed the delay with which migration flows follow the economic processes. Among the examples, which came during the discussion to illustrate such a delay as well as circulation (moving backwards and forwards), were the studies of migration between Poland and the UK over the last ten years. Again, economic factors explain only part of this movement; emotional and social ties also shape the process.

4. Linguistic capital as part of social capital in the context of mobility

In his discussion of discrimination in the context of migration Mace drew attention to linguistic discrimination. Is bilingualism of mother tongue and native tongue, e.g. French/Arabic, valued in France? Applying Bourdieu's concept of the

linguistic competence functioning as cultural capital to the linguistic situation in the context of international migration, multilingualism could be seen as a market where different members of the society are competitors who negotiate and exchange their own languages as linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991).

This discussion, as well as my conversations with colleagues during the days of our conference, strongly resonated with my own research on academic multilingualism in the context of international academic mobility and exchange. My study (2011: 237-276) which involved the academic staff of Bulgaria's second largest university showed that academic staff contended multilingualism was not about the number of languages academics speak or write in, but about publishing/lecturing in the 'right language/s'. The survey showed that academics who reported proficiency in up to five languages still felt excluded from international academic exchange in the case where English was not one of the languages they were 'proficient enough' in. This clearly referred to the hegemony of English as the language of academic expansion and exclusion. Publishing in English is considered not only as a ticket to international recognition but is also regarded as a measure of national and even intra-institutional academic value.

However, it is important to acknowledge that both multilingualism and exclusion are phenomena shaped by multiple factors (i.e. psychological, social, economic and political). These factors are in a complex interplay and it is not always obvious who is the excluder of the excluded. After all, our conference in Paris was for the most part held in English.

5. Living with risk

I would like to link the session I chaired with the theme of living at risk and natural disaster. The theme was discussed in other sessions but is also relevant to the session of Demography and International Migration. Natural disaster serves as a reminder that the decision to migrate is sometimes involuntary. People are pushed to leave their homes because of environmental crises, such as famine, flood and earthquake. Yet these crises are not just 'natural' since they involve the interaction between humans and nature. The Fukushima disaster, for example, was triggered by an earthquake and a tsunami but it also involved a nuclear power

station whose location and design was the product of human decision-making. Local inhabitants were forced to migrate from the area through this interplay between humans and the environment and we are seeing similar processes at work in the lives lost as boats of migrants sink off the coast of Thailand and in the Mediterranean.

This session and the conference more generally, reminded us that managing transformation challenges people to engage with constant change at diverse levels. Demographic changes and migration are both the product and the consequence of these challenges and illustrate their complexity.

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